

\mem\memories
March 25, 1997

Recitals

Half an hour or so before it my turn to play in a recital, I would go down to the men's room and soak my hands in a washbasin filled with water as hot as I could stand it. If it was too hot to start with, I would pull my hands out and run cold water over them and into the basin, then put my hands back in. When I got used to the temperature, I would make it hotter, till it seemed near boiling.

I rubbed my hands together under water, clenched them, grasped each finger in turn and massaged it, pressed the upper knuckles and the insides of the palms. When my hands were red and completely flexible, I took them out and dried them. Then I knelt down in one of the stalls with my head over the toilet, thrust one finger down my throat and made myself vomit. That made my body and my head feel light when I stood up.

If I had timed it right, I was ready to go up to the stage behind the curtains and wait a few minutes for my turn to go out in front of the audience and sit down at the piano. If I was a little too early I might have to soak my hands again.

Our recitals were held in June, in a red brick building owned by the Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs. June in Detroit was hot, and humid. There was no air conditioning then and the windows were open in the afternoons when we rehearsed, but the air outside and in was like steam heating set to the highest level. The white keys on the piano were slippery with sweat.

Sometimes when I was waiting my turn I went down to the basement, where it was damp and cool. Under the staircase was a table covered with piles and piles of old Readers' Digests, twenty or thirty years' worth, complete sets bound with twine. The copies were cool and slightly damp with mildew. I would slip the string off a year's collection and begin to compare issues closely, to see which would be the most rewarding to smuggle home.

I could only take two or at most three, one or two under my shirt and belt in front and one in back. So I had to choose carefully. I would look to see what books had been condensed (I remember one by Anne Morrow Lindbergh), and I glanced through the joke pages and the articles, especially the feature, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met." I would get the choice down to five or six, usually from different years, then down to two or three, which I put aside before I bound the piles up again.

When the rehearsal was over and we were ready to leave, I would slip down to the basement again and stuff the Digests under my clothes, pull my belt tight and walk carefully out to the

car. The magazines were cool against my stomach and back, and stiffened my posture. When I got home I hid them away. In the summer there were hours of daylight when I wasn't practicing and I read the Digests cover to cover.

Acquiring those Readers' Digests and reading them, a couple every year for five or six years, was one of the best memories of my piano career. I never got caught. It was the only theft I can remember committing, other than palming a few corks from a tray at Woolworth's when I was about ten to see it if could be done, until I copied the Pentagon Papers of course.